

The Realities of Governmental Communications

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Karen has worked as a Capitol Hill reporter for the Bureau of National Affairs Inc., teaches college courses on American Government and holds a law degree. Through an exercise where participants were asked to list the supervisors up their chain of command to the president, she conveyed the numerous actors who influence a message or policy as it passes from one layer to the next. Agency decisions are subject to influence by external groups and internal forces, and agency personnel need to recognize that these other parties have an important stake in agency actions.

Shifts in administrations result in changes in the priorities of government agencies who are coming under new leadership. Such shifts in policy direction are a part of the American political process and how well agencies read and address those shifts can determine the success or failure of a policy or program. These considerations also affect local sites. While there is sometimes a reluctance to accept these changes in policy direction, it is important that employees support their organization regardless of their personal feelings.

Politics can also set the stage for how an agency deals with issues such as fire. Again, there are different entities that have differing views about how fires should be fought or not fought and how areas might or might not be closed to the public for safety reasons. It is important to stay abreast of others' views and understand how various actors affect agency decisions. A good rule of thumb is to think outside the agency and to find common ground.

Hot issue briefings are a way to keep key players apprised of potentially contentious issues and to provide an understanding of stakeholders and their views. It is important to keep internal audiences with management authority over a park or program informed about any potentially contentious issues or policies. In doing so, those communications should be written with an understanding that they may be subject to Freedom of Information Act requests and could appear in the newspaper or otherwise made public.

When an agency faces a difficult issue, such as the Cerro Grande fire, how well the agency responds to that event will affect the fall-out from that event or issue. A video of Regional Director Karen Wade's interview on the Cerro Grande fire was offered as an example of good communications during a crisis because Ms. Wade was given high marks by the reporter/questioner for her straightforward, sincere and empathetic response to the tragedy. She spoke as a member of the community, and accepted responsibility for the event, rather than adopting a defensive, stonewalling posture.

Other media tips included:

- Keep use of jargon to a minimum (or if you do use jargon – define it!)
- Talk to a sixth grade level
- Refer issues outside of your expertise and job to the proper person
- Have one spokesperson in a crisis.